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Through the lens of the learner: Using photo-elicitation to assess the recreational needs of learners with intellectual disabilities

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Abstract

Appropriately organized recreation activities are crucial for children with intellectual disabilities, as they contribute to both intellectual as well as physical development, and sustain emotional well-being. In order to plan and implement suitable recreation programmes for learners with intellectual disabilities, it is necessary to gauge the needs and experiences of such learners. The current study employed semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews to assess the recreation needs of children with intellectual disabilities. Twenty-two learners with intellectual disabilities participated in the study. The findings suggest that recreational activities play an important role in the lives of the learners, and that their past recreational experiences have been substantially positive. The learners were satisfied with the sport and recreation activities organized at the school in the sense that they found the extent of choice with regard to sports and recreation activities adequate. The results of the study confirmed that children with intellectual disabilities have clear recreation preferences and are able to make informed choices based on their previous recreation experiences. Furthermore, the study demonstrated that photo-elicitation is a useful tool to afford individuals with intellectual disabilities a means of communicating their recreational needs and preferences.

Key words: Recreation, photo-elicitation, intellectual disability, communication.

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Introduction

Individuals with disabilities, regardless of whether they are physical or intellectual disabilities, are often stigmatized, encountering attitudinal and physical barriers in daily life (Murphy & Carbone, 2008). These individuals are usually excluded from the social fabric of their communities because of their disabilities (Vaughn, Elbaum & Schumm, 1996). As a result they are more restricted in their participation in most mainstream recreation activities. Learners with intellectual difficulties have been found to have poor peer-related competence (Guralnick, 1999) because of their being ignored by peers (Bryan, 1976), having fewer friends (Margalit, 1994) and experiencing a low social status (Taylor, Asher & Williams, 1987). These may reduce active involvement

in and poor inclination towards recreation activities. Anon (2010), however, posits that learners with intellectual disabilities share the same passion for fun and games as any other learners and their desire for stimulating recreation activities and a sense of independence is just as strong as their peers.

The recreation experiences of learners with intellectual disabilities can be positively or negatively influenced by the planning and choice of the activities. Organized recreation activities allow children with disabilities to participate in activities that contribute to both intellectual as well as physical development and coordination (Anon, 2010). They also contribute to a learners' emotional well being (Sandler, Ayers, Suter, Schultz & Twohey-Jacobs, 2004). Russell (1996) posits that recreation activities are effective means to provide learners with opportunities to learn appropriate social behaviours and to integrate with others. Such activities also instill in them a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Brown, Brown & Bayer, 1994). Schleien, Ray and Green (1997) argue that participation in recreation and leisure activities create the opportunity for individuals to develop meaningful relationships thereby achieving satisfaction in life.

Hamlyn (1995) states that recreation activities provide learners who have learning difficulties the opportunity to attain a healthy and optimistic lifestyle. Surujlal and Dhurup (2009) view recreation activities as an avenue to supplement the learning experiences of learners with intellectual disabilities. In addition, the authors posit that recreation activities contribute to increasing interactions between not only parents of learners with intellectual disabilities and their children but also interactions of these children and their teachers as well as their communities. Recreation activities are also the ideal vehicle to foster improved relationships with peers, both with and without intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, it can also promote independence and teamwork among these children (Patel & Greydanus, 2002).

Physical recreation is essential to the health and well being of special children. Murphy and Carbone (2008) posit that the participation of children with disabilities in recreational activities promotes inclusion, improves physical functioning, and enhances their overall well-being. It also provides the ideal platform for self-development and self-actualisation (D'Eath, Walls, Hodgins & Cronin, 2009). Buttimer and Tierney (2005) stated that recreation is important in enabling learners with disabilities to lead purposeful lives in their communities, thus giving additional importance to leisure in the lives of people with intellectual disability.

The epidemic of obesity is associated with lack of participation in physical and recreational activities (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006). Fragala-Pinkham, Haley, Rabin and Kharasch (2005) argue that learners with disabilities

are at a higher risk of obesity given the fact that they are more likely than mainstream children to be sedentary. Regular participation in recreation activities helps to develop fitness, motor skills, and knowledge that will enable learners to develop an active lifestyle into adulthood (Sit, McManus, McKenzie & Lian, 2007).

Problem statement

Despite the apparent awareness of the benefits associated with participation in recreation activities, learners with intellectual disabilities have lower levels of fitness, and have higher levels of obesity than their peers without disabilities (Murphy & Carbone, 2008). Children with intellectual disabilities are prone to higher risk of sedentary behaviour because their disability generally leads to a deterioration of physical functioning, which in turn limits their ability to participate in recreation activities (Rimmer, 2006).

Liptak and Revell (1989) argued that information about recreational activities of children with disabilities is sought after, especially by parents and educators. Because of intellectual impairments, learners often experience difficulties in communicating their recreation needs and in making decisions about participation in recreational activities (Lockwood & Lockwood, 1991). It is therefore difficult to gauge or anticipate what the actual recreational needs of learners with intellectual disabilities are from the learners' perspectives. The findings of the current study were expected to provide an indication of the recreation preferences of children with intellectual disabilities. By ensuring that activities are compatible to learners and ensuring that there is sufficient variety, positive reinforcement can help to create and sustain the motivation for participation (Durstine, Painter, Franklin, Morgan, Pitetti & Roberts, 2000). According to King et al. (2003) participation in recreational activities is dependent on the support that the school provides. While mainstream learners have the ability to choose between a variety of available opportunities associated with recreation, learners with intellectual disabilities are less able to do so. If this is not addressed, learners with intellectual disabilities may end up having an abundance of unstructured free time which may result in boredom and depression (Alberto & Troutman, 2003). It is therefore essential to provide structured recreational activities in accordance to the learners' abilities, preferences and needs.

According to Buttimer and Tierney (2005) improving the social outcomes of learners with disabilities requires intentional efforts on the part of educators to ensure that a conducive environment is created. In the context of this study this would mean that educators would need to create a conducive recreation environment. This would only be possible if they are aware of the needs of learners in this respect. Understanding the extent to which individuals participate

in leisure activities, how they participate and the barriers that prevent them from further participation could provide leads for designing and implementing effective programmes to promote and develop skills as well as enhancing the overall quality of life for individuals with intellectual disability (Buttimer & Tierney, 2005)

There are several factors that influence participation in recreation activities of children with intellectual disabilities. These include physical location and its size, presence of social support, availability of resources and expertise (MiHaylov, Jarvis, Colver, & Beresford 2004). Other factors include accessibility (King et al., 2006) and the provision of activities of their preferences (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). There is currently a paucity of research in the South African context regarding the recreation needs of learners with intellectual disabilities (Surujlal & Dhurup, 2009). This study attempts to fill the gap in research and contribute to existing literature. The purpose of this study therefore was to use photo-elicitation techniques to assess the recreation needs and preferences of children with intellectual disabilities.

Methods and procedures

The study design and location involved semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews conducted at a school for learners with special needs located near Sebokeng in the southern part of the Gauteng province of South Africa. The photo-elicitation technique may be defined as a social science research method where photographs are actively integrated into standard qualitative interviews (Prosser & Schwarz, 1998). The three main types of photo-elicitation interviewing are (1) participant-generated photo-elicitation, also known as 'autodriven' visual research as described in a seminal paper by Clark (1999). In this method the visual images are produced specifically for the purpose of the investigation by the interviewees under the supervision of the researcher; (2) researcher-generated photo-elicitation, in which case the researcher - or members of a research team for that matter - produces the visual material to be utilized in the interviews; and (3) photo-elicitation using existing or archival images, such as images drawn from newspaper archives, from corporate reports, or from family photo albums.

That is not to say that combining two or more of the above main photo-elicitation approaches is neither possible nor desirable. In fact, photo-elicitation has been successfully applied in a wide variety of research settings using different combinations of visual material produced either by the researcher, by the study participants, or by a third party. The term photo-elicitation does, however, imply the use of photographs as opposed to other types of visual material, such as hand-drawn illustrations, film clips and so on, in which case the term 'image-elicitation' is typically used (Liebenberg, 2005). The main reason

for using photo-elicitation as a research method is to mitigate the commonly encountered weaknesses of standard interviews, especially when a research project involves children. For example, Clark (1999) points out that young children rarely employ question-and-answer formats in order to exchange thoughts with peers, suggesting that a standard research interview falls “outside their sociolinguistic repertoire”. Integrating photographs into a standard interview means that the researcher communicates with the interviewee using both visual and verbal language, and not just verbal language as is the case with basic research interviews (Hurworth, 2003). In addition, previous studies have shown that employing photo-elicitation is associated with the accumulation of richer data, and that interviewees found photo-elicitation interviews less tiring and more interesting than standard interviews (Collier, 1979; Hurworth, 2003; Loeffler, 2005). Writing about the use of photo-elicitation as a research tool in child-centered research, Clark (1999) argues that “Children’s framings of reality constitute singular social worlds: pervasive, full of impact, and woefully underexplored. Child-centered researchers need tools for circumnavigating the complexities of these worlds from a youthful angle. The use of photography in autodriven interviews is a valuable tool for opening up children’s worlds to researchers, and for giving children opportunities to actively interpret their own experience.”

Ethical considerations

In the present study, the data collection procedure consisted of two phases. During the first phase, the aims and objectives of the project were discussed with the school principal who took the matter to a meeting with the school’s teachers for further input and clarification. Issues relating to informed consent were discussed and written permission was obtained from the principal to conduct the research at the school. At the meeting which the school principal held with the school’s teachers, two staff members, who were both experienced at working with learners with intellectual disabilities, were identified to assist with the project.

Procedure

During the next available sports and recreation period which was suitable for all involved, a digital camera was passed around in order for the learners, as well as the two teachers assisting with the project, to take photographs. The brief was to photograph ‘Anything about the sports and recreation period you find interesting, or feel should be photographed’. In addition, one of the researchers photographed the recreational activities taking place with minimal interference in order to prevent a situation where the activities being photographed are in essence simulated and facilitated, thus raising the catalytic authenticity (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) of the visual material. Copies of all the photographs taken on this

occasion were handed to the school principal for future use, such as in school marketing material or annual reports.

The above described process led to a total of eighty-five images, excluding those photographs which were deleted for technical reasons, such as out of focus images. Of these, three images were selected to be used in the interviews. The three images consisted of one photograph that was taken by a learner, one taken by a teacher, and one taken by the researcher. The images depicted three different recreational activities, namely soccer, netball and chess. The images on the memory card of the digital camera which was passed around during the sports and recreation period included several group photographs, such as a group photograph of the soccer team, as well as some images of two friends posing together. During the selection process, such images were not included in the final set of three images. The three images used in the interviews may be described as 'action shots', in other words a photograph of the goal keeper catching the ball (soccer), a ball being passed and the team players running on the court (netball), and a photograph of a chess player busy moving a chess piece on the board (chess).

The second phase of data collection involved a fifteen to twenty minutes long semi-structured photo-elicitation interview conducted with a selected group of the learners who had participated on the day that the photographs were taken (n=22). The interviews were held approximately a week after the photographs were produced. In order to introduce some degree of standardization, all the learners were interviewed by the same teacher, who received basic training about essential aspects of research interviewing beforehand. The interviews were conducted in one of the school's classrooms, which was a familiar environment for the learners, and was equipped with a computer, a data projector, as well as a digital voice recorder.

Each session was conducted in a language that the learner felt comfortable speaking, and commenced with the interviewer briefly orientating the learner about how the next fifteen to twenty minutes would be spent. At the outset of the interview, the interviewer invited the learner to choose one image out of the three to talk about, and thereafter the chosen image was projected on a screen using a data projector. The interviewer and the learner sat at a desk on which a voice recorder was placed, looking at the projected image together. The teacher who conducted the interviews was guided by an interview protocol, which covered (1) an opening question about why the chosen photograph appeals to the respondent, followed by (2) questions about the level of satisfaction with the current recreational activities on offer at the school. The interview protocol also contained questions about (3) the extent of choice regarding recreation activities that resides with the learner, (4) how free time is used, and (5) issues and concerns relating to boredom and the alleviation thereof. The final part of the

interview protocol dealt with questions about teamwork, such as ‘Do you prefer to play on your own or in a team?’ In addition to the above, follow-up questions such as ‘Tell me more about that...’, ‘Could you provide an example of that?’ or ‘What you are saying is...’. Such questions were inserted throughout the interview as appropriate.

The interviewer asked the questions in the learner’s language of choice but in cases where this was not English, then repeated the question in English for the purpose of the voice recording. In the same way, the interviewer repeated the respondent’s response in English for the purpose of the voice recording in cases where the learner answered in a language other than English. Even though this slowed down the data collection slightly in some cases, following such an approach simplified the subsequent data transcription and analysis procedures considerably.

The voice recordings were transcribed and a hard copy of the transcripts was supplied to the interviewer for validation. The data which the photo-elicitation interviews yielded were analyzed with the assistance of Atlas.ti software. The analysis procedure was designed to focus on the purpose of the study, namely to investigate the recreation needs of children with intellectual disabilities, in two phases. During the first phase, usually referred to as a ‘top down analysis’ (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999), the analysis sought to find responses in the transcripts that link to the broad categories which informed the interview protocol, such as issues and concerns relating to the learner’s preferences, extent of choice, use of free time, boredom and teamwork. During the second phase, a ‘bottom-up analysis’ (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999) aimed to identify information in the transcripts relating to the recreation needs of children with intellectual disabilities not directly covered by the themes contained in the interview protocol.

Results and Discussion

The learners who participated in the semi-structured interviews did not experience any difficulty in choosing one image to talk about out of the three images presented to them. The majority of the learners (n=22) chose the image taken by the researcher depicting a soccer match at the school (n=16), in contrast to the image taken by one of the learners of a game of chess (n=3), and the photograph taken by the teacher showing a game of netball on the school’s court (n=3). The responses supplied in the course of the interviews were on the whole short and literal in nature, and characterized by a low degree of verbal articulation. These types of responses were not unexpected in a school for learners with special needs (Vaughn, Elbaum & Schumm, 1996). All the replies to the opening question, which aimed to explore what the learners find appealing about the chosen image, dealt with the content of the image on a very literal

level, eliciting replies such as '[soccer is] ... *good for everyone. It teaches us to run and to focus on the ball not to look at people*' or '*I like the pieces [of the chess game]*'. None of the respondents commented on the process of taking a photograph or the creative controls associated with photography, such as that the photograph freezes the action or captures a decisive moment.

As far as the top-down analysis (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999) of the transcripts is concerned, the data strongly indicate that recreational activities play an important role in the lives of the learners and that the majority of the learners' past recreational experiences have been positive, and in some cases very positive. By way of illustration, responses relating to recreational activities in general include statements such as '*I like and enjoy it compared to staying at home*' and '*It is a nice sport, soccer gives us energy and makes us strong*'.

The results of the study also showed that most of the learners were satisfied with the sport and recreation activities organized at the school (n=20) and only two of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction. The verbatim response given by one of these two was '*No [I am not satisfied] because I'm too slow*'. Even though the interviewer gently encouraged the learners to elaborate on single-word answers or very short statements, such prompts were in most cases not successful and did not lead to the learner elaborating further.

Additionally, the data indicate that the learners found the current extent of choice with regard to sports and recreation activities at the school substantially acceptable. For instance, one of the learners stated that '*Yes [I have a choice in what activities you take part in], I am a defender*', which highlights that the notion of choice not only applies to choosing between one or more different sport and recreational activities, but also includes choices made within the context of a particular activity, such as whether to play soccer in the position of goal keeper or defender and so on.

Furthermore, the answers to questions relating to how free time is spent ranged from vague, open responses such as '*I just play anything*' ; '*Nothing*' or '*I just walk around*' at the one end of the spectrum, to more specific replies such as '*I do athletics*'; '*I train netball and do jogging*' ; '*I do gardening, cooking and washing at home*'; '*I play chess*' ; '*I stay in class and write*' or '*I play drafts*'. One of the learners indicated spending free time '*swimming*' even though the interviews were conducted in the middle of winter.

When the interviewer breached issues and concerns relating to boredom, which closely link to the learner's habits, views and opinions about free time, this elicited replies along the lines of '[when bored] *I chat with friends and also organize money to play soccer*'; '*I play cellphone games*'; '*I watch television*'; '*I play with friends and siblings*'; '*I play soccer and I don't get bored*'; '*I wash*

dishes and clean the house’; or *‘I draw pictures’*. In other words, the information in the transcripts suggests that in the world of the learners, boredom is something which can be alleviated by engaging in some or other activity, regardless whether that activity falls in the category of ‘sport and recreation’, such as soccer, chess, drafts and so on, or outside of it, as is the case with activities such as washing the dishes or chatting with friends.

Lastly, as far as the final part of the interview protocol which dealt with questions about teamwork is concerned, 20 of the 22 interviewees indicated their preference for teamwork. The two learners who indicated that they prefer to play on their own and not in a team stated that *‘I prefer playing on my own because I want to teach myself more styles’* and *‘It depends on the game’*. One of the respondents added that *‘I like cricket because I play with my friends’*, a statement which contains the insight that for the individual it matters whether the other team members are friends or not.

As far as the ‘bottom-up analysis’ (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999) of the transcripts is concerned, which aimed to identify information relevant to the sport and recreation needs of children with intellectual disabilities not directly covered by the themes contained in the interview protocol, the short answers of the participants and the low level of verbal articulation of these answers meant that only a few phrases and a small number of sentences were available for this phase of the analysis. One of the learners stated that *‘[sport] helps me to concentrate on doing the right thing compared to taking drugs and committing crime’*. This response may possibly have been given in order to *‘say what the teacher wants to hear’*, but it is equally plausible that the learner made the statement in order to try and share with the teacher that the positive impact which the sport and recreation activities offered at the school has on the lives of the learners should not be underestimated, especially if their lives involve regular exposure to crime or drugs. Stated differently, the learner’s comment seems to suggest that the negative consequences of discontinuing sport and recreation activities at the school would include an increased proclivity towards drug-taking and criminal activity on the part of the learners, and for this reason alone it is important to plan and implement appropriate recreation programmes.

The data also contain a few cryptic replies which are difficult to interpret. For example, when asked *‘What do you do when you are bored?’* one of the learners answered *‘I go to the castle’*, which may possibly refer to the well-known brand of beer in South Africa, Castle Lager. If this is the case, the reply means something along the lines of *‘When I get bored I drink beer’*.

Lastly, one of the learners mentioned that *‘you can be selected to represent the school at the provincial competitions’*, which raises two separate issues. Firstly, it is undoubtedly the case that some of the sports and recreation activities offered

at the school are more competitive in nature than others (King et al., 2003). The interview protocol did not contain any questions about whether the learners view competition in a positive or a negative light or what their needs in this regard are, and the issue requires further investigation. Secondly, the above comment highlights that at least some of learners may view the sport and recreation activities offered at the school primarily as stepping stones for something else (Russell 1996), such as national or international meetings and competitions, and this needs to be taken into account when recreation activities are planned.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that photo-elicitation is a useful tool to afford individuals with intellectual disabilities a means of communicating their recreational needs and preferences. The results of this study confirmed that children with intellectual disabilities indeed have recreation preferences and are able to make informed choices based on their recreation experiences. Ultimately, sustaining the interest and engagement of children with intellectual disabilities in structured recreation activities will contribute significantly to their quality of life.

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